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SUBJECT: MUSLIM PARLIAMENTARIAN DISCUSSES ISLAM IN SPAIN

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Spain's first Muslim Parliamentarian discussed with POLOFF Muslim relations in Spain and stressed the importance of grassroots activism to integrate Muslims into Spanish society. Noting the vast increase of Muslim immigrants into Spain in recent years, Mohammed Chaib cautioned against radical and fundamentalist trends in the country. In addition to xenophobic political attitudes, Chaib faulted the lack of unity within the Muslim community as a barrier to developing a more positive role for Muslims in Spain. He also criticized the divided Muslim leadership for not collaborating to build an official mosque in Catalonia, which has more Muslims than any other region in Spain. On a positive note, he said that the Arab world has high hopes for President Obama. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) POLOFF met on October 29 with Mohammed Chaib, a socialist party deputy elected to the Catalan Parliament in 2003 and, more notably, the first Muslim Parliamentarian in Spain. A Moroccan born immigrant whose family moved to Barcelona when he was a small child, Chaib shared his views on the state of Islam in Spain, and stressed the importance of immigrants integrating into Spanish society. He said that the high rate of Muslim immigration into Spain has greatly changed the Islamic community over the past 15 years, and noted that more Muslims live in Catalonia than in any other region of Spain. Approximately 1.3 to 1.5 million Muslims live in Spain, roughly half of whom are from Morocco. The number of Muslims in Spain has nearly tripled since 2003, when the population was estimated at only 525,000. Less than 30 percent are Spanish citizens, including descendents of immigrants and Spanish converts to Islam.

#### DIVISIONS WITHIN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

¶3. (U) The Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE), created in 1992, is the official entity representing Muslims in Spain. The CIE has outlined cooperative agreements on education, prayer in the workplace, imams and other policies to help manage Muslim relations with Spanish society. According to Chaib, however, these agreements were never fully developed and have been poorly implemented. He said that competing interpretations of Islam, coupled with cultural differences between Arab, Pakistani, sub-Saharan and Spanish Muslim converts create further divisions. He added that much of the discordance within the Muslim community stems from the competing interests of the two administrative bodies that comprise CIE - the Federation of Islamic Religious Entities of Spain (FEERI) and the Islamic Community Union of Spain (UCIDE). Chaib explained that FEERI was originally created to serve Spanish Muslim converts, while UCIDE was oriented toward Arab immigrants. He said that the two federations need to unite under one secretary general with a common mandate to integrate Muslims into Spanish society. Chaib, who participated in a State Department International Visitors Leadership Program on immigration in 2002, noted, "Islam is the same. However, the administration of Islam is

very different."

14. (U) Chaib faulted the Islamic institutions for not adapting to the changes and rapid growth of the Muslim community. He warned of the "dangers of many different religious movements from all over the world" competing for the attention of Muslims in Spain, explaining that a unified, moderate religious leadership is necessary to fight radical views. Chaib is a staunch proponent of Muslim integration, and he said that his primary struggle is "against those Muslims who want to stay un-integrated." He explained that two types of radicalism exist in Spain-political radicalism, which is an anti-modernization, fundamentalist movement led by the Moroccan-based Justice and Charity group, and religious radicalism, which is characterized by Salafists who advocate a separatist, strict interpretation of Islam. Promoting his modern, moderate views, he declared, "we are living in the 21st century, not in the era of Muhammad."

15. (U) Having grown up in Barcelona, Chaib's first languages are Catalan and Spanish, and he said he did not learn to speak Arabic until he returned to Morocco to attend high school. He maintains strong ties with Morocco and recently traveled there with the mayor of Barcelona on an official visit to discuss the Moroccan community in Catalonia. Adding that Moroccans comprise half of the Muslim population in Spain, he stressed the importance of Spanish-Moroccan relations to combat radicalism and cautioned that Morocco needs to stay vigilant against extremism to prevent "what happened in Algeria."

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NO MOSQUE IN CATALONIA

16. (U) Although Catalonia has more Muslims than any other part of Spain, no proper mosque exists in the region. Muslims in Catalonia congregate in approximately 170 neighborhood prayer rooms and oratories, many of which are informal operations run out of garages or commercial spaces. In 2006 a proposed mosque in the beachfront Badalona neighborhood of Barcelona was defeated by a campaign directed by Partido Popular activists who gathered 4,000 voters' signatures against the mosque. (Note: Another ongoing proposal to build a mosque in the city of Lleida has faced similar opposition for the past eight years. End Note.) Chaib also cited the anti-immigration Platform for Catalonia party as "racist and anti-Muslim". Much of the blame, he added, stems from the lack of unity within the Muslim community as the different factions cannot agree on the characteristics of an official mosque. While Chaib did say that relations between Moroccans and Pakistanis in Catalonia are good, he believes that the Pakistani community resists integrating and being more open to Spanish society. Chaib said that his goal is to have a "Muslim community that lives in peace within Spanish society, and has a true mosque."

17. (U) Chaib said that until several years ago many of the imams in the informal prayer centers did not have residency permits, and obtaining religious-based visas was difficult. He credited the Spanish government in recent years for recognizing the importance of legalizing the immigration status of religious leaders, and said that most of the roughly 170 imams in Catalonia are now legal residents. Chaib said that as the number of Muslim immigrants increased, traditional fathers increasingly voiced their concerns with their daughters receiving a westernized education. As a result, the Spanish government recognized the importance of promoting moderate religious leaders to explain the role of Islam in a western society.

## COMMUNITY RELATIONS

18. (U) Chaib also stressed the importance of educating Muslim youth and Spanish born children of immigrants to be politically active and participate in society. The founder of the Ibn Batuta Socio-Cultural Association, a secular organization that aims to improve relations between Muslims and Spanish society, Chaib is active at both the political and grassroots level. The Ibn Batuta center - named after the famed 14th century Moroccan explorer - organizes cultural activities, neighborhood dialogues, workshops on Islam, and job assistance programs. Chaib said that because of the high number of immigrants that typically work in Catalonia's now struggling construction industry, the economic crisis has hurt Muslims particularly hard. He added that economic woes and unemployment create more tensions than do religious and cultural differences.

Noting that Latin American immigrants in Spain can vote in municipal elections - unlike most Muslim immigrants- Chaib mentioned the importance of the Spanish government signing bilateral accords with Morocco, Pakistan and other countries to allow non-citizen immigrants to participate in the political process.

19. (U) Chaib, who excused himself three times during the hour and a half long meeting to vote on different resolutions in the Catalan Parliament, spoke highly of his 2002 visit to the U.S. and like many interlocutors these days was hopeful that President Obama would visit Barcelona next year. Before concluding the meeting with a tour of the Parliament building and introductions to several other socialist deputies, Chaib said that Arabs have both high hopes and high expectations for President Obama, noting "the doors of hope are opening, and it's easier to work in that environment."

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